

Mastering the Essay

Lesson 8 – The Expository Essay

READINGS

- **"The Music of the Spheres, or the Metaphysics of Music"** (Robert R. Reilly)
<https://theimaginativeconservative.org/2022/08/music-spheres-timeless-robert-reilly.html>
- **"The Ambition of the Short Story"** (Steven Millhauser)

EXPOSITORY ESSAYS

- The purpose of an expository essay is to give the reader an overview of a given subject by presenting them with the most important and pertinent information about it.
- An expository essay can be about almost anything—if it can be talked about, it can be written about!
- **The focus is less on providing the reader with your own analysis than providing them clearly and elegantly with an understanding of the topic.**
- The work still has a thesis, and everything should flow from it, but unlike in most essays, the thesis does not have to be controversial—it just has to be something that is worth the reader's time, about which they do not know that much. **Here are some examples of expository theses and argumentative theses—can you pick out which are which?**

A: Australia's National Action Party has the most trustworthy politicians.

B: Australia's National Action Party has a record of voting for family-friendly policies.

C: In the two years since the National Action Party was elected, their party has honoured all of their election promises.

D: The only differences between the born and the preborn are size, location, and level of development.

E: Atheists for Life argues for the defense of preborn life based solely upon interpretation of scientific evidence rather than incorporating religious teaching in to their arguments.

F: Human life should be defended from conception to natural death.

G: Texting while driving has led to a significant number of accidents and deaths.

H: Texting while driving is unwise, irresponsible, and should be illegal.

- **It is important to determine your audience, as this knowledge will guide you as you determine what to leave in and what to leave out.**
- Ask yourself, who are the ideal readers for this paper? Absolute beginners to the subject? Those with a basic background who want to go deeper? Experts?
- In general, beginners will need a broader overview of the subject, and you may need to explain the more basic elements if they are not common knowledge, such as terms specific to your subject. The more experienced in the subject your target audience is, the more you can assume they already know the basics, and you can zone in more specifically on a particular angle of your topic.
- **Choose the scope of your essay appropriately.** The more specific your thesis,

the more in depth you will be able to go. The broader the thesis, the more shallowly you will be able to touch upon the information you bring up.

- For example, if your thesis is “Charles Dickens’ childhood affected the way he wrote his novels,” all of his childhood, all of his novels, and all of his writing process are up for examination! You only have a small amount of ink to spill, so you’ll have to be quite broad in your examination.
- On the other hand, if your thesis is “The time Charles Dickens spent working in a blacking factory as a child profoundly influenced the ideas he introduced in Chapter Six of *David Copperfield*,” the field you are examining is much more specific and you’ll be able to include plenty of detail.
- **Consider “The Music of the Spheres.”** What do you think Reilly’s thesis is? Who is his target audience? What are some strategies he has used to make his paper effective?
- **It is very important to separate fact from opinion when presenting material in an expository essay.** You can include opinions, so long as you are introducing them to help the reader gain a sense of what people think about the matter, or to show that there is more than one side to the story. Present these things fairly and honestly as surrounding data. In an argumentative essay, you have room to try to sway people to the side you favor. In an expository essay, you should just present the opinions impartially.
- **Expository essays often contain a strong research element, so remember to cite your sources!**

VIVID EXAMPLES, IMAGES, AND EXPRESSIONS

- Even though you may be writing to your teacher whose job it is to grade your essays, a good writer wants to write in such a way that someone will *want* to read his essay. A good writer knows how to make an essay not only inform but also delight. You want the form of your essay to complement and vivify the content. As an essayist, you are an artist, and your medium is words. The beauty of words is called **prose style**. How can you delight your reader in your writing? One way is to use vivid expressions, examples, and anecdotes. Go back to the Steven Millhauser essay—how does he use vivid words and images to make his little essay so much more readable? How can you do something similar in your own writing?
- Everyone loves a good story! An **anecdote** is a short narrative of something true that happened. Telling a compelling anecdote requires selecting interesting details, pacing your story well, portraying the setting, describing interesting characters, etc. —borrowing, if you will, from the world of fiction. An expository essay is an excellent place to experiment with anecdotes. Since there is no argument, you want to enliven your topic, make it fascinate—and a good story always helps!
- **Anecdotes don’t just entertain—they provide examples that help the reader understand the information you are giving him in a context.** Good places to use anecdotes:
 - When an example would clear up any misunderstandings about the topic.
 - When you need to show how something would play out in real life.

- When you need to alter the flow of the essay to keep it from getting repetitive or dry.
- When an anecdote just begs to be told (so long as it flows from the thesis).
- You can get anecdotes from your own experience, news items, history, literature, media—the list is endless. Ask yourself, “What happenings or conversations do I associate with the subject I am writing about? Would they help me explain?”
- **Similarly, you can use analogies and other comparisons to strengthen your essay.** Compare something that might elude the reader’s understanding with something that might be more imaginable for him. For example, many people might not have a sense off the top of their heads of how heavy 250 kilograms are, but if you tell them to imagine the weight of a large motorcycle, the frame of reference becomes more accessible. It drives home comprehension.
- **Again, you can use comparisons and analogies to drive home a point for emotional understanding.** For example, you are already making a point that should impress us when you point out that John Wurzel-Flummery is not a scientific expert, since he is not a scientist, nor has he even one any upper-level studies of science, and yet many people who remember him as the actor/presenter from the children’s show *Cool Adventures in Science* treat his opinion with more respect than that of real scientists. However, you could hammer the point home the point that trusting Bill Nye’s opinion over that of scientists is rather like assuming that Ian McKellan can do magic because he played a wizard in the movies! You might have to qualify the analogy (after all, perhaps John Wurzel-Flummery learned some elementary science from the scripts he presented) but you have driven home the point emotionally!

REMINDER ABOUT TRANSITIONS & A NOTE ABOUT PARAGRAPH LENGTH

- Remember that the job of transitions (transitional phrases, sentences, and paragraphs) is to show how one idea leads to another. This helps the logic of an essay, but it also makes it more readable. Brief transitional paragraphs can be used to introduce "sections" of a paper in which one idea will be discussed in two or more paragraphs. Longer papers often need sections.
- **Variety is the spice of life!** One way to make your paper more readable is to vary the length of your paragraphs. Try chopping up large paragraphs into smaller sections that easily transition from one to another. Sometimes very short paragraphs (1-2 sentences) are helpful for giving the reader a little "break" from a complex argument. Think of paragraph length as a way to pace your essay. Shot length works similarly in movies—slow, romantic, or touching moments will often be filmed in very long, continuous shots. Fast-paced, action-filled scenes will be cut in very short shots. Note that this rule also goes for sentences. Try varying your sentence length to control the pacing and interest of your paper.

Assignment

This week, **write an expository essay** about a topic in which you are interested and with which you are already fairly familiar that is not common knowledge. You may do some research if it is helpful to you in writing the piece, but do not pick a topic that you do not feel well-grounded in already. The thesis should be informative rather than argumentative.

Make sure that you offer the reader a clear, concise, and enjoyable reading experience that leaves them with an understanding of something they lacked knowledge in before. **You will be graded in part on your pleasing use of words—enliven your writing with interesting word choice, vivid anecdotes, illuminating examples.** Think carefully about who your target audience is. Choose a proper scope for the essay, neither too narrow nor too broad in thesis. Use at least one anecdote and at least one analogy in the essay. Use proper MLA style throughout, in your formatting, citations, bibliography, etc. Double check with the Stylebook reference guides from Class 7. **The essay should have at least six paragraphs. Try including a brief (one to four sentences) transition paragraph and vary your paragraph (and sentence) lengths!**